

**TO:** Members of the Rhode Island House of Representatives

**RE:** Support for H-7788 (Ranked Choice Voting for Presidential Primaries) and H-7981 (Municipal RCV Charter Authority)

### **Introduction**

The two bills before this body represent a coherent, two-track approach to electoral reform: H-7788 would establish ranked choice voting for Rhode Island presidential primaries, while H-7981 would empower municipalities to adopt RCV through their own charter amendment processes. Together, they constitute a measured, democratic, and evidence-grounded expansion of voter agency in this state. This testimony examines the policy rationale, the evidentiary record, and Rhode Island's particular readiness for this reform.

### **The Problem These Bills Address**

Rhode Island's current plurality primary system, in which the candidate with the most votes wins regardless of whether a majority of voters support them, routinely produces nominees who do not command broad consensus. In crowded primary fields, a candidate can prevail with 25 to 35 percent of the vote, effectively meaning that two-thirds or more of participating voters preferred someone else. This is not a theoretical concern; it describes the structural reality of multi-candidate primary elections nationwide. Voter satisfaction with democracy has been decreasing over time, and this is a real source of risk for the long-term stability of democracy. [American Bar Association](#) Plurality primaries, which reward mobilizing a narrow base rather than building broad coalitions, are a contributing mechanism to that dissatisfaction.

### **The Evidentiary Case for RCV**

The research record on ranked choice voting has matured considerably. Arguments in favor of RCV include improving representation and the number and diversity of candidates by lowering the bar to run for office, giving voters - especially independents - more choices, and potentially reducing polarization by electing more consensus-building candidates. Remember, independents currently make up over 50% of registered voters in Rhode Island. Choice is key in this state.

The most recent and geographically proximate evidence is instructive. In New York, 96 percent of 2025 Democratic primary voters found RCV simple to use, and 76 percent wanted to keep or expand it to other races. In Alaska, 84 percent of voters in 2024 found it easy to use. [CT Mirror](#) These are not marginal approval numbers — they are near-consensus endorsements from real electorates.

The 2025 New York City mayoral primary further demonstrated RCV's structural benefits. With a dozen candidates competing, RCV transformed what would have been a zero-sum contest into a positive, issue-based campaign in which candidates sought cross-endorsements and asked to be ranked second by opponents' supporters rather than attacking them to differentiate themselves. [CT Mirror](#) That is a qualitatively different — and healthier — form of democratic competition.

Research by Reilly drawing on cross-national data finds that RCV changes elections from zero-sum contests to more positive campaigns, and that preferential systems have been lauded by scholars as a potential mechanism for mitigating group conflict and reducing tension in divided societies. A 2025 peer-reviewed study of Alaska's system found it associated with more ideologically moderate candidates winning elections. [American Bar Association](#)

### **Rhode Island Is Ready**

Critically, the infrastructure question that has complicated RCV implementation elsewhere does not apply here. Rhode Island has received a 2025 RCV Readiness Score of 100 percent, with all 752,087 active registered voters served by RCV-capable voting systems. [Ranked Choice Voting Resource Center](#) The state's vendors - ES&S and Democracy Live - already support RCV tabulation. Implementation is not a barrier; it is a solved problem.

### **On H-7981: The Municipal Option**

H-7981 deserves particular analytical attention because it embeds a safeguard that addresses the most common objection to top-down electoral reform: it requires local voter approval through a charter amendment before any municipality may adopt RCV. This is democratic reform through democratic process. It grants no municipality RCV unless its own voters choose it. The bill creates optionality and local control, exactly the kind of subsidiarity that allows Rhode Island communities to serve as laboratories for broader learning.

### **Acknowledging the Counterarguments**

Honest analysis requires acknowledging that the RCV research record is not without complexity. Some studies have identified voter confusion among certain demographic groups, and at least one study of Maine found lower voter confidence under RCV. [Institute for Responsive Government](#) These findings are real and worth monitoring. However, they argue for strong voter education programs alongside implementation — not against the reform itself. The New York and Alaska data, drawn from far larger and more recent electorates, point toward high comprehension and satisfaction when voters are adequately informed.

### **Conclusion**

H-7788 and H-7981 are complementary, proportionate, and evidence-supported measures. One elevates the presidential primary; the other empowers local communities. Both expand voter agency. Both are technically feasible today. And both respond to the well-documented erosion of public confidence in elections by giving voters a system in which more of their preferences are counted, more candidates are incentivized to campaign broadly, and the winner must earn genuine majority support. This will, as it has in other places, lead to greater voter turnout — the ultimate measure of a thriving, trusted democracy.

The legislature has before it not a radical departure, but a structural upgrade. A defense against the anti-democratic wave building in our country. Rhode Island's voters, and its voting systems, are ready. The evidence supports moving forward. I ask you to please pass H-7788 and H-7981.

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*Submitted in support of H-7788 and H-7981*